22 September 2005

Original: English

Committee on Conferences
Substantive session of 2005

Draft report

Addendum

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V. Translation and interpretation-related matters

A. Language service posts

1. At its 469th meeting, on 22 September 2005, the Committee on Conferences considered the section of the report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences concerning the vacancy situation in language services posts (A/60/93, paras. 63-66), together with supplementary tables on the vacancy situation at the four duty stations updated as of 31 August 2005 and a chart on the use of short-term staff at the four duty stations from 1 January to 31 December 2004.

2. The Committee was informed that the demographic transition in the translation services continued to result in a high vacancy rate at Headquarters. The large number of retirements and the resulting influx of new staff had placed a heavy burden on training capacity and was bound to have an impact on overall productivity. The situation was more stable in Geneva and Vienna. Vacancies in both the translation and interpretation services at the United Nations Office at Nairobi continued to be a problem because successful candidates from the recent competitive examinations for language posts had been unwilling to accept assignments in Nairobi, particularly against extrabudgetary posts. During the videoconference held during the Committee's 467th meeting, on 21 September, the Committee learned that four of the six currently vacant posts in interpretation at Nairobi were expected to be filled by the beginning of 2006.

Discussion

3. Some representatives expressed cautious optimism about the prospects of improving the vacancy situation at Nairobi, but pointed out that the Secretariat should try harder to induce roster candidates to accept assignments at this duty station. It was important to ensure that the mobility initiative was sustained. A more

effective solution might be to conduct competitive examinations specifically for Nairobi, and to notify candidates before they registered for the examination that if they passed they would be assigned to Nairobi; the Group of Arab States had offered to assist in conducting such an examination for translators and interpreters into Arabic. It was pointed out that China had assisted in conducting competitive examinations for Chinese language staff.

4. The representative of the Secretariat said that the Department was working with the Office of Human Resources Management on the possibility of examinations for specific duty stations, Nairobi, for example.

5. Some delegations stressed that vacancy rates overall were far too high. The Secretariat should redouble its efforts to address the problem and it should plan ahead and advertise foreseeable vacancies. The representative of the Secretariat said that posting of jobs on Galaxy prior to the occurrence of the actual vacancies had already begun.

6. After reviewing information about short-term local and non-local recruitment, it was pointed out that cost savings should not be pursued at the expense of quality. The representative of the Secretariat stated that many local short-term staff were retirees who had a thorough knowledge of United Nations terminology and that quality was the paramount consideration.

7. Under the terms of the agreements with the International Association of Conference Translators and the International Association of Conference Interpreters, short-term staff members had the right to designate any professional domicile they wished. It was noted that some language services seemed to use far more non-local staff than others and that this may indicate unequal treatment. It was explained that temporary interpreters and translators were subject to the same rigorous testing as were regular recruits.

B. Informational meetings

8. At its 469th meeting, on 22 September, the Committee considered the section of the report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences on informational meetings (ibid., paras. 67 and 68), which were held separately for each official language, to brief Member States on the terminology used and to consult with them on the improvement of the language services.

Discussion

9. Many delegations, stressing that quality was their main concern, expressed strong support for the holding of the informational meetings, which provided a chance for Member States to air problems in a frank exchange and for the Department to evaluate their satisfaction with the quality of conference services provided.

C. Rates of self-revision

10. At its 469th meeting, on 22 September, the Committee considered the section of the report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences that concerned rates of self-revision (ibid., paras. 69-71). The Committee was informed that self-

revision rates for 2002, 2003 and 2004 were within the target percentage (45 per cent) approved by the General Assembly at the United Nations Offices at Geneva and Vienna and exceeded the target at Headquarters and the United Nations Office at Nairobi. For 2005 to date, the rate at Headquarters was 54 per cent. However, owing to the demographic transition in the Department, the ratio of revised translators to revisers was expected to shift in 2006, bringing the self-revision rate down, especially in the Arabic, Chinese, French and Spanish services, where there had already been considerable turnover. The downside of that shift might be a lowering of productivity, given the influx of new recruits and the time that would be needed for their training.